



HAND, FOOT AND MOUTH DISEASE: getting worried?

Hand, foot and mouth disease (HFMD) is quite common during summer and early autumn, affecting mainly infants and children to 5 years of age in small epidemics in nurseries and kindergartens. In recent months, there has been a continuous rise in HFMD activity in Hong Kong, Guangdong, Mainland China and Singapore. Our Government and the public have been concerned about the local outbreak of the disease. Parents and schools are getting worried, especially after a nurse suddenly died from it last month.

HFMD is caused by intestinal viruses such as Coxsackie and Enterovirus 71 (EV71), and is moderately contagious. The disease is spread through direct contact with the mucus, saliva, or faeces of an infected person. It is extremely uncommon in adults but some may develop complications arising from an overwhelming immunological response.

The usual incubation period is 3 to 7 days. Common signs and symptoms include fever, headaches, malaise, oral ulcers, rashes on palms and soles, flu-like feeling, loss of appetite, diarrhoea, vomiting, etc. Few sufferers may require hospital admission, mainly as a result of complications, such as encephalitis, meningitis, convulsion, dehydration, sudden limb weakness, pneumonia, pulmonary oedema, pulmonary haemorrhage, myocarditis, etc. The disease normally runs its course over about a week, and most patients may only require symptomatic treatment and adequate hydration.

Prevention is extremely difficult because of the lack of effective vaccines or specific medicine for this disease. Avoidance of case contact and, strict personal and environmental hygiene are very important measures. Thus affected children should stay home until they are well. Hand washing is an effective method of prevention.